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“Home sweet home, that’s where I come from, where I got my knowledge of the road and the flow from” (Kano, “Home Sweet Home”)

Grime music as an expression of identity in postcolonial London.

Abstract

This paper examines how Grime music and the Grime scene function as a vehicle for expressions of identity – individual, local, national and transnational – for some young people growing up in the multicultural, postcolonial context of the UK capital in the 21st century. Grime is electronic music, often with rap-style vocals, which emerged from London around the turn of the millennium, and which offers insights into the experiences of a section of, predominantly black, working-class urban youth. The stories Grime tells paint a vivid picture, not just of individual lives in particular communities, but the larger canvas of a global, multicultural city in perpetual transformation, and the resulting changes in cultural and socio-linguistic practices.

Keywords

Grime – London – Urban – Multiculturalism – Postcolonial - Identity - Ethnicity

This paper examines expressions of identity – local, national, and transnational - in Grime music and the Grime scene. Grime is a form of electronic music, often featuring quick fire rap-style vocals, which emerged from London, and specifically the East London district of Bow, around the turn of the millennium. Grime is worthy

of study not just because it is an exciting and innovative cultural phenomenon on its own terms, but also because it offers an insight into the recent and contemporary experiences, identities and ontologies of a section of working-class urban youth, which is otherwise often neglected in, or excluded from, public discourse. Grime and the stories it tells paint a vivid picture, not just of individual lives in particular communities, but the larger canvas of a global city in perpetual transformation. Changes in London's cultural and socio-linguistic practices reflect shifts in its internal demography and geography, but also in how it engages with and is affected by the rest of the world; London is unquestionably a diverse society, but the mix of cultures is always in flux. Grime also vividly expresses socio-linguistic and cultural developments in the post-war, post-colonial, and arguably post-multicultural city. I want to argue here that it articulates new types of identity, novel manifestations of being a Londoner, of being English. It is indicative of an apparently paradoxical combination of often very restricted geographies and global cultural horizons. Although a predominantly black musical form, Grime does not preclude an "authentic" white (or other ethnic) identification; both musically and lyrically it illustrates a process of cultural blending which creates new modes of identity and expression. The city and the nation's more recent tangled political and economic history has also left its mark, creating new patterns of inequality and exclusion, alongside novel hybrid cultural manifestations. Digital media has, to some extent opened up the world and a sense of opportunity to some, but the twin forces of gentrification and austerity have left their mark at a very local level. Political and economic currents produce cultural effects, articulated perhaps most urgently by those segments of society most excluded from and neglected by establishment power structures. In this paper I explore and interrogate these themes, drawing on a range of

scholarly, popular, and primary sources, including songs and music videos, blogs, and interviews with individuals active in the scene.¹

Grime has recently begun to make a significant impression on the mainstream of the music industry in the UK, and public consciousness as a consequence, but it continues to flourish as a “grassroots” genre. As such, it is a vital medium for the expression of identity and the sharing of experiences for marginal fractions of the population, providing a voice for the voiceless. Consequently, I think it can be argued that Grime can be legitimately understood as a type of English Folk Music, albeit with a rather different aesthetic to that usually categorized as Folk. Winter and Keegan-Phipps’ use of the concept of performativity – of both music and nationality - to explore English Folk is relevant here. Drawing on Judith Butler’s theories of performance they suggest this is a useful “approach that offers a non-essentialist way of thinking about [...] identities as produced, rather than being naturally given.” (12) Grime is a distinctively English type of music, but represents, or performs, an Englishness that has responded to, and absorbed aspects of, the cultures of the diverse immigrant populations that make up the mosaic of contemporary multicultural London. Grime artists are constantly consciously producing and reproducing their identities through their performances, as individuals, as representatives of a music scene, and of local, national and translated communities. Such a perspective can make help sense of a young, black, MC Crazy Titch’s claim that “I’m from East London, I talk Cockney ‘cause that’s how we all talk round ‘ere. This is me. This is us. This is England. I’m so British, I’m fish and chips, I’m pie and mash” (qtd in Collins 179).

Grime is a “home-grown” type of music; born in bedrooms on inner-city housing estates, it was initially distributed via an underground network of raves and pirate radio stations, small run vinyl releases, and home-made “mixtapes.” The scene was, in its early days at least, “a community, in which the mostly teenage MCs and DJs all knew each other: if not locally, from school or from the local estate, then through Grime” (Hancox *Stand Up Tall* 33). Music was, and is, often made on computers nominally purchased for the purposes of schoolwork or family usage, using free or “cracked” (illegally copied) software. This shaped some of the genre’s aesthetics, such as tempo and certain sonic qualities. Wiley, the scene’s undisputed originator, known as the “godfather” of Grime, describes his early, adolescent, efforts: “I was using the same programs my dad had on his computers – Logic, Fruity Loops. [...] Fruity Loops was the one I made a lot of early tracks on. It came with a standard 140bpm tempo setting. [...] and I was just putting things together on there” (*Eskiboy* 72-3). This experimental D-I-Y ethos was born of necessity, but gave the music a raw and immediate quality which resonated with local youth. Mike Skinner, aka The Streets, recalls a friend who worked in a London record shop “saying he didn’t understand what was happening. He used to sell records to DJs, and now he’d get ten teenage kids who would all come in together being really rowdy and buy one (according to his criteria) really badly produced instrumental between them” (308).

Lloyd Bradley describes the music as sounding like “the noise pollution of its inner city environment. Ringtones, video game bleeps and traffic noise replace conventional musical sources...with oral acrobatics that defy the mundanity of the favoured subject matter: life as it is lived on some of London’s bleakest council estates” (54).² He suggests that “it’s called “Grime” for the same reason punk was

dubbed “punk”: in order to draw attention to its scuzzy street origins” (56). Wiley concurs, suggesting that “MCing is basically the same as singing in punk – shouting on a beat to say something. Shouting on a beat to get a reaction” (*Eskiboy* 79).

Grime, like punk, gave a voice to marginalised youths, it was “an opportunity to talk about what we knew, what was happening to us, or around us. The sound came from our situation. It’s a cold, dark sound because we came from a cold, dark place. These are inner-city London streets. It’s gritty” (79). This coldness is evident in some of Wiley’s early instrumental tracks such as “Eskimo” (2002) and “Ice Pole” (2002). These tunes are sparse and uncompromising, with minimal synth lines and high hats skittering over heavy, often muffled and echoing bass melodies that sound almost as if they were recorded deep in a cave or under water. It is strange and novel music.

As Wiley observes: “You hear people talking about the Grime sound coming from another planet? Well, that’s because it does” (79); but it is also music firmly grounded in the material realities of the city. This combination of other-worldly sonic weirdness and social and geographic specificity is well illustrated by the 2005 track “When I’m ‘Ere” by Roll Deep, a “crew” featuring Wiley and seven other MCs. The tune opens with a creepy and insistent accordion riff, while the start of the rapping (or “spitting”) coincides with an explosive bass drop, sound effects of guns being fired and shells emptied, and MC Scratchy’s trademark “warrior charge,” an American Indian-style whooping war cry. The song functions as a “showcase” for the various styles of the MCs, and as such the lyrical content is neither narrative nor particularly original, though often witty. It consists of a series of stated intentions to make money and get high, and of boasts about the prowess of individual MCs and the crew as a whole compared to their peers, often couched in terms of threats of cartoon and metaphorical violence, (“Melt your whole crew like cheese”). The video features

members of Roll Deep walking through a council estate at night-time, each dressed in a black tracksuit with the hood up, all heading to a gathering in one of the flats. For all the vocal bravado and the “ghetto hood” dress code, there is a sense of the vulnerability of the MCs when they are alone, and the comfort and safety offered by the gang. The video has a simple premise and treatment, but represents a trope that has become paradigmatic (perhaps to the point of cliché) in Grime, and the whole package of sound and visuals is profoundly evocative of a particular (type of) place and of the lives lived within it. As R1, a 21-year-old MC from North London observes, “I’m sure I’m not the only person who hears ‘When I’m ‘Ere’ by Roll Deep in my head every time I walk through a council estate” (R1).

Grime music has “an inner London sound” (Rose) born of cultural diversity and intermingling. Esi, a DJ also working in music management, argues that Grime could not have happened anywhere *but* London, with its rich resources of mixed immigrant communities, diverse musical heritage, and underground infrastructure of pirate radio and sound systems (Esi). Initially brought to the UK by Jamaican immigrant communities, sound systems combined reggae records with live vocals, played through towering speaker stacks. From the 1970s British sound systems emerged to provide a platform for producers and vocalists who created their own distinctive variants, including the “fast chat” vocal style, with lyrics addressing the UK experience. Representative of this is Smiley Culture’s “Cockney Translation” (1984), the lyrics of which move between Cockney³ English and Jamaican Patois, both widely spoken and understood by black British youth. As Ben Gidley observes, both Cockney and Patois are “minor languages, implicitly defined in opposition to ‘the Queen’s’ standard English,” (149) but Paul Gilroy notes that

neither of the two languages available to black Londoners appears adequate for the expression of their complex cultural experience by itself... [The record suggests a new generation of black British citizens] beginning to discover a means to position themselves relative to this society and to create a sense of belonging which could transcend 'racial', ethnic, local and class-based particularities and redefine England/Britain as a truly plural community (264).

We see this too in the emergence of UK Hip Hop, from the late 1980s. Groups like London Posse started out imitating American styles, but were also influenced by UK sound system culture, and began, in songs such as "Original London Style" (1990), to formulate a uniquely British sound, which merged these influences and featured vocals mixing Cockney, Patois and standard English, with lyrics containing distinctively UK references. Jeffrey Boakye recalls that "in '93, it was genuinely thrilling to hear things about eating packets of cheese and onion crisps on a *rap* record" (32).⁴ As Andy Wood observes, these musical and lyrical developments reflect the "polyglot of hybrid sounds and voices found in London and other major cities that have experienced large scale migration and settlement" and asserted "a very English identity, though one [...] not part of the mainstream, where a black British or other black identity were rarely positively represented" (180).

Gidley asserts that "[b]lack expressive culture [...] decisively shaped youth culture, pop culture and the culture of city life in Britain's metropolitan centres" (145). Geographical proximity and the resulting social and cultural mixing meant that "it was not just black Britons who were able to enter white cockney language, but also

white Londoners who were able to enter the languages of blackness” (150). Roger Hewitt’s 1986 book *White Talk, Black Talk* analysed the speech of working-class youth in South London and described a generation (black and white) able to strategically switch between the “codes” of Patois, Cockney and standard English. A decade later Les Back’s ethnographic studies suggested that it was no longer a case of code-switching, but of “a process whereby lexical terms filter through into a shared speech community” (51) - a speech community composed not just of black and white, but also, for example, Asian and Cypriot origin youth. Likewise the London and UK urban music scenes. Back wrote of the 1990s Jungle scene that it

demonstrates a diaspora sensitivity that renders explicit the Jamaican traces within hip hop culture along with a radical realignment of national images. Black, white and Asian junglists all claim that the music uniquely belongs to Britain, or more specifically that jungle is ‘a London somet’ing’. For these citizens, jungle is music to feel at home in... simultaneously local, national and transnational.... This refashioning is part of a profound process in which the politics of race and nation is claimed and redefined by young people, a project that still possesses a vitality and urgency within Britain’s cities. (234)

This combination of post-colonial diversity and hybridity with a local inflection is also a key characteristic of Grime music. Like British Reggae and Jungle vocals, Grime “spitting” is fast and urgent. It “is supposed to be twice the speed of US-style rap: typically, you had just 16 bars to show your skills (or 21 seconds, as So Solid Crew put it), before passing the mic to the next MC – a rule that made Grime the most thrilling, ADD-friendly onslaught of a genre” (Hancox, *Stand Up Tall* 99). Grime is an omnivorous genre, drawing on diverse global music forms – R&B, Hip-Hop,

Ragga, Bhangra and Brazilian Baile Funk, and there is even a variant known as “SinoGrime” featuring Chinese-style instrumentation. Grime is, however, located firmly within the UK tradition of bass-heavy “street” sounds, with Jungle/Drum and Bass and UK Garage the most obvious and influential precedents. MC Flow Dan recalls that “jungle opened our eyes. It made us realise that our accents were allowed. Suddenly we could be ourselves. We didn’t have to try and be anyone else. It made us want to do it” (qtd in Wiley *Eskiboy* 53). Flow Dan remembers too the effect of seeing a London UK Garage collective on television: “I remember watching *Top of the Pops* with Wiley and Target [...], and So Solid were on. [...] And they were like, ‘[...] This is *mandem on the TV!* It’s us! It could be us!’ I think Wiley saw a blueprint of what to do” (qtd in *Eskiboy* 66). As UK Garage became more commercially viable and sought to reach a more “upmarket” club crowd, DJ Logan Sama alleges that it “disassociated itself from the underground, the crews and the MCing. [...] They wanted to separate themselves out from a council estate scene they considered uneducated, aggy, rough” (qtd in *Eskiboy* 94). However, Wiley says he “realised that we [...] didn’t really need anyone else. We had decks, we had the mic, we had the radio. Didn’t need to wait for anyone, impress anyone, push anyone. Just us (41). So we took what we had and we worked with it. Bits of jungle. Bits of ragga. Bits of garage. In the end we created something different” (79). DJ Semtex describes Wiley’s protégé Dizzee Rascal’s 2003 debut album *Boy in da Corner* as

an evolutionary Rosetta Stone of lyricism in the UK. It is the true voice of the UK inner-city experience, everything prior to Dizzee’s debut album was either a by-product of US hip-hop culture or Jamaican dancehall, whilst Dizzee Rascal was unapologetically British with his distinct abrasive approach to barring. Whether it’s the flow, tone, audacity or slang, you can hear the DNA

of Raskit in every UK MC today. (qtd. in Collins 107)

Younger generations of Grime artists can now locate themselves within a thoroughly English musical heritage. Stormzy (ten years old when *Boy in da Corner* was released) observes: “A lot of people say they grew up on [...] Tupac and Biggie. I don’t know about anyone else, but I grew up on Lethal, Bruza, D Double E, Flirta D. [...] Our generation didn’t listen to US hip-hop...” (qtd. In Collins 281).

The language used by Grime MCs is the vernacular language of many young(er) Londoners in the twenty-first-century. This language, like the music, has become ever more hybrid, “irretrievably ‘creolized’: mixed, impure, to the point where [...] it becomes impossible to establish an authentic, definitive original...” asserts Gidley (157). Identified as Multicultural London English (MLE) by socio-linguists, this novel dialect is a product of an increasingly ethnically and linguistically diverse city. Linguists (see, for example, Cheshire et al.) observe that MLE is characterized not only by the development of a new vocabulary, described as “slang” by its users, but also innovations in pronunciation, speech rhythms. and grammar. Grime lyrics often celebrate and exploit the diversity and malleability of the English language, and blogger Martin Clark, aka the producer Blackdown, applauds the creativity of Grime and its constant poetic innovation.

Between his corruption of pronunciation, his road slang and wordplay, [MC] Trim’s got an amazing grasp of the Queen’s English. It makes me think of all those stuffy, establishment grumpy bastards like John Humphrys, who use their expensive educations to write books bemoaning the demise and diversity of the English language.

I don't buy it.

[...]

And what's worse about the establishment claiming definitive ownership of the English language is that Grime so clearly cherishes it too. Look at how expressions are overtly created and propagated by its key players through mediums like mixtapes or pirate radio ('The flow dan').⁵

As this suggests, MLE has been subject to criticism, attack and derision from political and cultural conservatives, accused variously of hastening the decline of linguistic standards, impinging on educational achievement and social mobility, of "pushing out" the traditional Cockney dialect, and fostering a culture of criminality and anti-social behaviour (see Kerswill). A recurrent theme in hostility to MLE is that it represents the incursion of a "foreign" "blackness" into the English language and culture. This is implied in the use of the term "Jafaican" (i.e. fake Jamaican) to refer to MLE in popular cultural contexts, but also, and more seriously and explicitly, in the accusations made by the right-wing historian David Starkey following the London riots of August 2011. Appearing on the BBC current affairs television programme *Newsnight*, Starkey made the startling assertion that:

The whites have become black. A particular sort of violent, destructive, nihilistic, gangster culture has become the fashion, and black and white, boy and girl, operate in this language together, this language which is wholly false, which is this Jamaican patois that has been intruded in England, and that is why so many of us have this sense of, literally, a foreign country.

Although it might suit the agendas of commentators such as Starkey to connect MLE both with criminality and particular ethnicities and immigrant groups, Cheshire et al.

assert that it is better understood as simply reflective of the very diverse cultural and linguistic ecology of contemporary London. Their research found that: “[i]n perception tests, listeners from London could not distinguish ethnicity with any certainty, confirming therefore that MLE is an ethnically-neutral variety. More MLE-sounding voices were likely to be thought to be from London by listeners who were not Londoners” (67).⁶

Grime’s geographic origins are emphasized explicitly in handles, song titles and lyrical content with MCs often identifying themselves not just by city, but also by their specific home area (Newham Generals), by postcode (Wiley’s “Bow E3” 2007), housing estate, or other local landmarks (The Square’s “Lewisham McDeez” 2015). The constant references to places of local significance can be located within a long-established tradition of naming within black music. Dick Hebdige writes that:

Naming can be in and of itself an act of invocation, conferring power and/or grace upon the namer: the names can carry power in themselves. [...] More importantly in this context, the namer pays tribute in the ‘name check’ to the community from which (s)he has sprung and without which (s)he would be unable to survive (8).

This is known as “repping the ends”; the “ends” being, suggests Gidley, “charged with a powerful ethical significance” (153). He attributes to this the “symbolic importance of the image of the post-war council estate in Grime music” (153). This is evident in the video for “When I’m ‘Ere”, discussed above, and its enduring significance is illustrated by Novelist’s 2015 track “Endz”, and its (self)consciously lo-fi video, filmed on his home estate in South London. The video features young people in tracksuits hanging out, riding bikes and skateboards, smoking joints and

eating fried chicken; it “celebrates”, suggests Boakye “the mundane to the point of turning it into a virtue” (256).

This intense localism reflects the reality of the lives of many young working-class people, particularly boys and young men. Gidley cites studies showing that in contrast to their wide-ranging middle-class peers, this group, constrained by “[c]artographies of fear and risk,” (153) rarely travelled beyond the boundaries of their housing estates, let alone the borough or the city. Gidley observes a “powerful *sense* of exclusion – from the freedom of the city” amongst young people “living in South London within sight of St Paul’s Cathedral on the north bank of the Thames who almost never had cause to cross the river” (153). In the 2003 documentary *Wot Do You Call It*, MC Breeze, of Roll Deep, gestures towards Canary Wharf from a council estate balcony, “That’s where all the yuppies are, we’re just over the road and it’s one of the worst boroughs in England.” Or as Dizze Rascal put it, in a BBC profile of the same year, “It’s in your face. It takes the piss. There are rich people moving in now, people who work in the city. You can tell they’re not living the same way as us” (qtd in Hancox, *Stand Up Tall* 241). One consequence of this sense of exclusion from the wider city is that differences within and between small areas of London that would be invisible to outsiders are identified and emphasized; as Hancox notes, “it’s clear that territorialism intensifies as the space you are allowed access to gets smaller” (281). Martin Clark observes that:

In Grime, disputes over tiny disparities of turf are the be-all and end all. Roll Deep got angry at me once when a sub changed an intro to say that their Baring House/West Ferry/Lime House aka “Wilehouse” (“because it gets so wild”)” was “proper east end like the Isle of Dogs.” I.o.D is where Trim, now

ex-Roll Deep, is from, and it's little more than a mile or two down the road:
yet it made *all* the difference ("The flow dan").

Trim himself bears out this analysis: "I don't spit standard bars because I'm not a standard person, I'm not thinking like these guys, I'm not from the same place as these guys, they're from E3, I'm from E14, I've got a different set of words in my head and I play with them" (qtd in Clark, "The original nuttah").

The emphasis on localism might also be seen as a means of managing identity in a large and diverse city. For many young Londoners, an attachment to place is more significant than ethnic or racial identities, and helps overcome any tensions that may arise from the latter. As Gidley suggests:

When young people identify so intensely with place, what is opened up is a very strong possibility of explicitly inhabiting multiple identities. To have such a strong sense of loyalty to Ghetto or Pepys [housing estate] *and* to Deptford *and* to South London already means that multiplicity is taken for granted. At the same time, the diversity and proximity to difference is something that young people have experienced from birth. [...] complex family histories that made multiple identifications inevitable: Nigerian *and* white British *and* Jamaican; Ghanaian *and* Irish; Bajan (from Barbados) *and* West African. A frequently expressed theme among these young people was a simple pride in 'who I am' and 'where I'm from', which is hard, because of this multiplicity, to map on to any absolutist version of ethnic belonging (157).

To some extent the intense localism of the early Grime scene was also a consequence of the communications technology available at the time. As DJ Target recalls:

“Before the internet and YouTube, if you wanted to hear or see Grime, you had to go to Eskimo Dance, go and buy the records in Rhythm Division, you had to listen to the radio” (qtd in Collins 164). The reach of the illegal transmitters of pirate radio stations, erected precariously on top of tower blocks, was perhaps no more than a couple of miles. They nonetheless functioned as important community hubs and incubators of talent. Knowing that their audience would be their neighbors, more or less, it made sense for MCs to be specific about where they were from, and to include local references. This intense localism generated both a sense of community and feelings of claustrophobia, and in the case of the pirate radio stations this was often literal. Dozens of young men crammed into tiny, sweaty studios produced a febrile atmosphere that fostered creativity, but also conflict, and sometimes the verbal jousting of rap battles could spill over into actual violence. In a now notorious scene from the appropriately titled “Conflict DVD” (2003) a teenage Dizzee Rascal and Crazy Titch come to blows over possession of the mic during a “freestyle” session at Deja Vu FM. In such a context, strong localized attachments have sometimes escalated into so-called “postcode wars” between rival gangs. Pitbull T, another member of Roll Deep, observed in the *Wot Do You Call It* documentary that “you could go Stratford [from Bow] to buy trainers and get battered or stabbed up.”

There is undoubtedly an association between Grime and “what has been termed the ‘road’ culture of contemporary marginalised urban youth in Britain, ‘characterized by ‘spectacular’ aggressive/hyper masculine modes of behaviour, incorporating violent and petty crime, fraud/personal identity theft and low-level drug dealing”” (qtd in Ilan 43). A number of high profile Grime artists have histories of drug-dealing and violent crime, as both perpetrators and victims, often both. However, as Jonathan Ilan

argues, “[t]here is no basis to infer anything but a coincidental link” between Grime and criminality; rather, it is important to see Grime as a product of its specific environment and, as such, as “a form of cultural expression underpinned by the same systemic and structural problems of inequality, poverty, racism and exclusion which give rise to criminality” (46). In such environments criminality can be regarded as a means of getting by and making things happen, whether that be earning money by “shotting” (drug dealing) or reaching an audience via pirate radio.⁷ Lyrics and stage personas also reflect this environment and if they don’t exactly glorify it, they certainly emphasize it, not least because this is regarded as a mark of “realness” and a source of creativity. A consequence of this, argues Boakye, is that “MCs are basing their authenticity in the edgiest persona they can find” (61). This is a trait shared by many youth cultures, and again a comparison with punk is relevant here, not least the adoption of clothing deemed offensive or threatening, and of *nom de guerre* such as Sid Vicious. Such performative re-inventions of the self can offer opportunities for empowerment and social capital. As Ghetts suggests:

when you’re growing up, I think the most important thing to you is finding an identity that resonates with your peers and in the best case scenario elevates you above them. Where I’m from, we hate the identities we are given because there is nothing inspirational about them, so we create alter-egos. You call them street names or aliases, but for us it’s about refining who you are and who you want to be (qtd in Boakye, 224-5).

Unlike punk, however, a key element of Grime’s oppositional status is rooted in race and racial stereotypes; “black to the mainstream’s white, poor to the mainstream’s rich, aggressive to the mainstream’s passive... In a word, Grime might best be described as ‘other’, and nowhere is the otherness debate more piqued than in terms

of race” (Boakye 133). Consequently, “[f]or the Grime MC, pressures to conform to these oppositional norms are huge. Grime artists are virtually under obligation to assert themselves and acknowledge a black identity” (Boakye 277).

One particularly influential cultural figure in the shaping of this performative identity is the Jamaican “badman,” itself to some extent a derivation of American Western and Gangster films. The badman emerged from amongst

the ghetto dwellers of Jamaica’s deeply impoverished slums who struggle for dignity and material sustenance. ‘Badman’ tropes provide a cultural grammar to attain both of these, through embracing the will to violence wrapped in sartorial cool and consumerist distinction (Ilan 43).

Carolyn Cooper explores how the concept of the “lyrical gun” as a variant of the badman forms part of “a tradition of stylized, ritual verbal violence in Caribbean popular culture” (430). Here the gun symbolizes “the fire power of the singer’s (or MC’s) music and lyrics,” (433) and gunfire is used “as a symbolic salute to the verbal skill of the heroic DJ/singer, [...] by the flashing of cigarette lighters [...] and] the expression ‘pram, pram!,’ a verbal rendering of simulated gun shots” (435). These tropes are also ubiquitous in UK urban music, and in Jungle and Grime in particular; for example, MC Jet Li’s claim that Roll Deep “blaze hot fire” (“When I’m ‘Ere”) when he is on the microphone, the insistent “brap brap” that punctuates countless tunes, and the “gun finger salute” that signals audience appreciation in a club or rave context. Grime lyrics often contain threats of other types of metaphorical, lyrical violence; MCs assure their rivals that they will “kill” them, or break jaws and skulls with the power of their words. Paradigmatic is Lethal Bizzle’s 2004 track “Pow (Forward)” in which the lyrical punches match the pounding beat and stabbing synth

strings, and various MCs threaten to shoot rivals and doubters, or to leave them in wheelchairs, bloody, and short of teeth. This track was reputedly banned from a number of radio stations (Capital Xtra) for its explicit content, and by some clubs for the exited mayhem it prompted on the dancefloor (Hancox, “Pow!”). As Cooper notes with regard to the Jamaican context. “[t]he persistence of this tradition of role play [...] makes it difficult sometimes for outsiders [...] to accurately decode local cultural signs. Fusion of the literal and the metaphorical can confuse the issue” (434). That is, while there have been incidences of violence at Grime events, this is rooted in issues external (if contextual) to the genre, rather than a product of it.

Hancox notes that the violent imagery deployed by Grime MCs also runs to other unsavory outlaw regimes and characters.

Dizzee proclaims on “Seems 2 Be” he “runs things like Idi Amin”; [...] Trim, is one of several MCs to illustrate his hardness by comparing himself to the Taliban, sometimes going by the name Taliban Trim; Chronik’s [...] video for “Deepest Darkest” seems him styled as an amoral, machete-wielding military dictator of the African nation of Udunknow (*Stand Up Tall* 401).

This last reference points to an important aspect of identity in Grime, although one that is generally expressed in a less aggressive fashion. As the foregoing indicates, the dominant cultural influence on black British popular music culture has been Jamaica, but Grime has also increasingly acknowledged the influence of Africa. This is an important development with regard to the self-esteem and identity of many second and third generation black Britons, whose heritage was often erased or downplayed. Skepta recalls that: “When I was a youth, to be called ‘African’ was a diss. At school, the African kids used to lie and say they were Jamaican. So when I

first came in the game and I'm saying lyrics like, 'I make Nigerians proud of their tribal scars/My bars make you push up your chest like bras', that was a big deal for me" (qtd in Boakye 252). Likewise, argues Boakye, it's a big deal that Dizzee Rascal referred to himself as the "E3 African," and other artists such as Sway, Chip, JHus and Stormzy all emphasize their African heritage. He reflects that:

Blackness in the UK is not a simple thing; it's a complicated mesh of heritages and cultures loosely held together by hue. Grime offers a far richer adhesive, introducing a UK-bred set of codes of conventions that second and third generation Afro-Caribbeans of single and multi-heritage can all opt into, without compromise, without question. Black Britain has always enjoyed an implicit unity, but Grime makes this super-explicit in a Millennial context (329).

Grime, like London, has the capacity to offer an identity that is open to all ethnicities and cultural and national backgrounds, and although the contribution of black culture and experience cannot be overstated, London's multiculturalism means that Grime is "a UK-bred set of conventions" that *any* working-class young urbanite can "opt into, without compromise, without question" regardless of their ethnicity. Wiley asserts: "The Grime nationality is rudeboy, now. And anyone can be a rudeboy, you get me. It's not just for black kids any more. It's for everyone: black kids, white kids, Indian kids, Turkish kids, Moroccan kids. It's a release" (78). R1, of Pakistani heritage, feels strongly that

Grime has been inclusive [...] from day one. The target audience and people involved in the genre just happen to mostly be black but people of all ethnicities have contributed to it in some way or another. [...] Nobody in the

scene has ever tried to put me down based on my race and in all honesty I've never personally witnessed or heard about racism in Grime (R1).

Omid, from Croydon, asserts that "Grime has nothing to do with ethnicity. My mum is British White and my dad is Persian [...] I've never had a problem organising events or seeing events...." (Lalfam). This is not to say that Grime obscures ethnic distinctiveness, and British-Born Chinese Mr Wong has made a performative gimmick of his. The lyrics of and video for his song "Who's That Boy" (2006) flag up his ethnicity whilst humorously addressing stereotypes of Chinese culture (Kung Fu movies) and first-generation Chinese immigrants (selling counterfeit DVDs on street corners). He is currently styling himself as "The Yellow Michael Jackson."

Nonetheless, Boakye suggests that, perhaps unsurprisingly, "Grime's relationship with whiteness is complicated," not least because the "mainstream audience that Grime has courted since its earliest days is essentially a white audience, invited to buy into Grime" (373). Writing in response to the announcement of the 2016 Mercury Prize nominations, which included both Skepta and Kano, journalist Chanté Joseph accuses white Grime fans of cultural tourism, wanting "the black British working-class experience through interaction with the music without actually having to acknowledge the struggles and the tribulation that the music and experience is born [*sic*]" (Joseph). There is perhaps something in this argument, although it is neither new nor restricted to Grime; it has been around for as long as there has been black popular music, and is to some extent an unavoidable scenario in the contexts of a commercial music industry and continuing racial inequalities. However, Joseph's further claim, that the "experience grime describes is the black-British working-class

experience,” is more problematic as it discounts the contribution of the minority of white working-class Grime artists. Wiley recounts that the early Grime sound was developed in his white friend Scratchy’s bedroom, with Scratchy a valued collaborator. Rinse FM, arguably the radio station that has played the most fundamental role in the success of the genre, was started by two white men, DJs Geeneus and Slimzee. Wiley’s favourite MC is Devlin, white and from Essex, who displays, argues Boakye, a

fierce authenticity. He is unapologetically white, by which I mean he does nothing to distract from his identity as a white Briton. His flow has none of the West Indian flavour you might expect to have sprinkled into the cadence of a Grime MC, typified instead by elongated, cockney vowels and jaw-jutting glottal stops (144).

Joseph’s article attracted a great deal of attention on social media, and prompted two scene insiders to respond directly and challenge her claims. P Money posted a video on Facebook arguing that the piece was ill-informed and did not speak for Grime artists. He stated his belief that music should not be about race, and acknowledged the influence of his white best friend, Little Dee, who encouraged him to MC, and the support of his white audience (P Money). Aaron Page, on the blog of *The Link Up* (the UK’s second largest online urban music platform), asserts that while Grime is surely black music,

“BLACK MUSIC ISN’T ONLY FOR BLACK PEOPLE

It doesn’t prohibit anyone who isn’t black from enjoying or taking part, the label is simply to acknowledge its origins.” (emphasis in original)

He continues:

The most baffling part of this whole discussion is the simple fact that a black genre being so beloved by non black people is a near definition of multiculturalism. It's what the country is all but founded on. [...] The curry is a British staple. It has been thoroughly ingrained into the British diet. But because it is a part of British culture, Brits love it and many non Asians can make a great curry that doesn't change it's *[sic]* origins; it just proves that British culture is an amalgamation of various other cultures. (Page)

Nonetheless, in some media coverage of black Grime artists, their Britishness is not a taken-for-granted quality. One example was BBC news journalist Jeremy Paxman's 2008 interview with Dizzee Rascal on *Newsnight*, on the day of Barak Obama's election, during which he asked "Mr Rascal, do you feel yourself to be British?" (*Newsnight* 2008). Although the BBC defended the question in the context of a wider discussion of British identity and race, commentators such as Lee Billingham of the charity Love Music Hate Racism found it objectionable, and discriminatory, and suggested that: "A better line of inquiry would be to explore if racism is affecting whether non-whites 'feel British' in 2008" (Pidd). Likewise, following Stormzy's criticism of the Conservative Government's response to the Grenfell Tower tragedy⁸ at the 2018 Brit Awards ceremony, Amanda Platell, journalist and former head of media for the Conservative Party, wrote an article in the *Daily Mail* in which she berated the MC for his lack of "gratitude" to a country that had "offered his mother [an immigrant from Ghana] and him so much," accusing him of "trashing it." Responding in the *Independent* newspaper, Edward Adoo observes that:

We rarely ask people who are Australian (as Amanda Platell is) or American or northern European to show their gratitude for Britain "taking them in" or

offering them a home. [...] His parents coming from Ghana should have no bearing on whether or not he is allowed to voice his opinion on Theresa May's response to Grenfell.

Grime entered the most hallowed and elite realms of the British Establishment when in early 2018 Wiley was invited to Buckingham Palace to collect an MBE for services to music. However, the *Daily Mail* marked the occasion with the headline "Grime Does Pay! MBE for drug-dealer turned rapper," (*Daily Mail* 2018) and an article which focused on sensationalist details of his past life. Fans responded angrily on Twitter, claiming racist reporting, deliberately intended to reinforce negative stereotypes about black music and black men in general, whilst downplaying their genuine achievements. The issue here is not whether the content of such media coverage is factual, but the discursive emphasis and framing of the material, which "others" and excludes certain fractions of the UK population, creating "folk devils" with no context. With repetition, the idea that Grime music is inextricably linked to violence and criminality becomes pervasive, and such assumptions or beliefs have real material effects in the context of policing and licensing. Most notoriously this was manifest in "Form 696," introduced by the Metropolitan Police in 2005. Nominally a risk assessment form for live music events, this was widely criticized for disproportionately targeting music of black origin. Interviewee Esi reports that when staging events, venue managers told her "we don't want it to be too Grime or too urban" (Esi). In September 2017, London Mayor Sadiq Khan requested that the use of the form be subject to scrutiny, and stated that it should not be allowed to "compromise the capital's vibrant grassroots music industry or unfairly target one community or music genre" (Ellis-Petersen).

In the short documentary made to accompany the release of his 2016 album *Made In The Manor*, Kano reflects on growing up black and working-class in inner-city London, on the sharp end of prejudicial assumptions. He observes: “There’s definitely a feeling of, we’re not supposed to be shit, or have shit, or become anything great, you know what I mean? There’s an underlying attitude that we all grow up with, from around here, and I just wanted to be so much more, and just to do better.” Likewise Dizzee Rascal who, after his debut album won the Mercury Prize in 2003, was able to “leave the beefs, angst, and potential danger behind. Why stay on the Stratford rooftops having petty squabbles with your fellow teenagers, when you could be dueting with Shakira?” (Hancox, *Stand Up Tall* 93). The price paid for this was, however, a dislocation from his origins, both geographic and cultural. Dizzee himself observes that “[w]hen I made *Boy in da Corner*, my life revolved around pirate radio sets and raves, and that album catapulted me to the beginnings of my festival career. I’m even less in the mix than I was, so the urgency to make that type of music isn’t there. I’m just not in that environment” (qtd in Collins 108). His later, more commercial output was regarded by many Grime fans as lacking the heart and artistic integrity of his earlier material. In 2012 Dizzee performed at the opening ceremony of the London Olympics, watched by an estimated television audience of 900 million people worldwide. He wore a baseball jacket with an “E3” logo on the breast; the birthplace of Grime, now the site of the Olympic Park. Dizzee Rascal acknowledged where he had come from, but he was now a superstar; *from* the “ends” but no longer *of* them. His status shifted from local hero to “national treasure, [...] a part of British culture” (qtd in Collins 110), “repping” Englishness to a global audience.

Dizzee’s career trajectory raises the perennial question of how underground artists can

or should progress creatively and socially once they become successful, particularly when their initial success was largely dependent on a gritty and authentic expression of hardship and an outsider perspective. As DJ Citrus argues:

They can talk about the street they used to know, but if they aren't living that life now how can they represent 2018 street life? If you're spending every day in meetings and at photoshoots, how can you be the voice for a kid in an East London tower block? I think it's amazing that certain artists started off doing music for the love of it and have now made a living off of it, but you can only express your own life, not anyone else's (DJ Citrus).

Some Grime artists have opted to stay as geographically, socially and culturally connected to their "ends" as possible, even after commercial successes. In (perhaps deliberate) contrast to Dizzee, for much of his career Wiley chose to remain a "star in the hood." This is a status that can only be achieved if "you rarely leave it – you know everyone, and everyone knows you" (Hancox, *Stand Up Tall* 93). Hancox suggests that Wiley "was the archetypal local celebrity – he couldn't walk down Bow's epic, boisterous market street Roman Road without being mobbed, but he loved it" (93). In November 2015 Wiley's matchless influence on the development of Grime was acknowledged when he was awarded the first MOBO Paving The Way prize. This was a "walk of fame" style paving stone that he chose to lay at Bow School, which both he and his father attended. R1 states that he thinks

it's important for artists especially from the lower social backgrounds to still be involved in their communities in some way or another, not just to pay their thanks for the support but to inspire the next generation to either follow in their footsteps or create new paths for the next batch of working class kids trying to find their way in life (R1).

Writing in 2004, Bradley predicted that Grime's uncompromising style, black cultural roots and self-contained system of production and distribution made it unlikely to be recuperated by the mainstream. Ilan argues that, for much of the first decade of the 2000s, Grime "occupied a space tantalisingly close to commercial success then blocked by the reaction of industry and policing agencies to the music's road aesthetic" (45). Consequently, a number of Grime artists released more pop-oriented music which often proved successful, leading to high chart positions and a decent financial return. This move was regarded by most of their peers as a necessary compromise, allowing artists to raise their profile and make money, which was often invested back into Grime proper. However, Skepta winning the 2016 Mercury Music Prize for his album *Konnichiwa* represented a new era in Grime; record sales and a level of fame consistent with more conventional pop stardom, but without any apparent concessions to the mainstream in the music. Significantly, Skepta has achieved success without help from major labels; all his music has been released on Boy Better Know, the label that he runs with his brother JME, and he claims that "all I've ever wanted [is] for London to have a credible musical voice. I will honestly, honestly die happy knowing that I saw it happen" (qtd in Duggins). Success without apparent compromise has also characterized Stormzy's career, since his breakthrough hit, "Shut Up." Originally released on YouTube as a no-frills freestyle video, in which he performs a live vocal surrounded by his crew and local kids in a South London car park, it proved so popular that a studio version of the song was released. This got to number 8 in the charts at Christmas 2015, due in part to a concerted campaign to get an artist other than the *X-Factor* winner to the top spot.⁹ Stormzy was only the second British unsigned artist ever to achieve a top ten chart placing.

Grime's originators were stunned by this development. Crazy Titch marvels that

Ten years ago me and Wiley used to talk about getting Grime in the charts and now ten years later this guy Stormzy has gone and done it with a freestyle. He's just spitting bars on an instrumental and it's in the charts. It's crazy. [...] I really can't believe I heard something like that on Radio 1 (qtd in Collins 306).

As Ilan observes:

Such developments are likely to have implications for the cultural identities and imaginaries of disadvantaged urban youth. The new online mediascape and music industry democratisation have redrawn the lines of symbolic inclusion and exclusion, creating new opportunities for those possessing the requisite aspiration, fluidity of identity and entrepreneurial acumen, whereby street cultural expression is commodified in a counter-typical manner (51).

Grime is now a scene of multiple generations with scope for reflection on, and celebration of, its own history and heritage, and the place of the music within the broader landscape of English popular music and culture. Released in 2016, Kano's fifth studio album, *Made In The Manor*, is a mature reflection on identity and history; not just at the intensely personal level of an individual artist, but also of the Grime scene, and of the country, city, and streets that he calls or has called home.¹⁰

References in the tune "New Banger" are so specific that he identifies roads, house numbers and the names of neighbours. However, in the epic "This is England" he draws not just on his own story and that of the Grime scene, but also a broader English history and culture, if not quite the "National Trust version."¹¹ To make the video to accompany this song, Kano toured the length and breadth of the country,

from the East End, to Land's End, to Blackpool Tower. The film features a kaleidoscope of quintessentially English places, people and symbols. It takes in terraced houses and tower blocks, "greasy spoon" cafés, jellied eels, pie and mash shops, tea shops, kids on quad bikes, weapon dogs, fox hunting, motorways, duck ponds, fly-tipped armchairs, the police, rain, stately homes (punningly synced with lyrical references to Kano's own "manor"), St George's and Union flags, bingo, beaches, pubs, amusement arcades, folk music, football, craggy coastlines, country churches, the London Underground and Grime raves. The song also looks back nostalgically to the early days of Grime: "Back when Lethal Bizzle was Lethal B/this is how we used to dun the dance in East/We used to spit 16s til they called police." This serves too as a reminder of how much things have changed in East London since the birth of Grime, and there is no small irony in the fact that the Stratford tower block from which Deja Vu FM broadcast was demolished to make way for the Olympic Village (Hancox, *Stand Up Tall* 40). Dizzee's appearance at the Olympic opening ceremony could therefore be regarded as a eulogy as much as a celebration, a requiem for a scene, a community and a place now wiped out by a globalized sport and entertainment industry, and relentless gentrification. Or as Jammz succinctly puts it: "apart from pushing up all the rent prices/These Starbucks ain't doing shit for the ends" ("It's A London Thing" 2016).

That said, there is cause for celebration of what Grime has achieved already, and room for optimism about its future potential. Dizzee Rascal at the Olympics or Stormzy on *X-Factor* can be interpreted as hegemony at work, as the incorporation of dissent by the culture industry, but these artists' agency and capacity to impact upon the national story and Britain's self-image should not be underestimated. Matt

Mason, founding editor-in-chief of underground urban magazine *RWD*, goes so far as to claim that Grime “has completely changed the narrative in the UK. It gave a generation a voice and the country is better off as a result” (qtd in Collins 291). DJ Semtex is confident that Grime is going to keep on changing that narrative, playing a part in creating a British urban culture that accurately reflects, and seeks to make better, the nation, cities, and neighbourhoods from which it emerged.

I think it’s still a baby. When you look at hip-hop, its forty years old. [...]

Grime is thirteen years old, there’s so much to be done, there’s so much to be said, there’s so many barriers to be kicked down. I don’t even think it’s gone a hint of where it could go yet. I think it’ll be ten times bigger than what it is and it’ll do it naturally. I don’t think it’s down to a label, I don’t think it’s down to one individual. I think it’s just kids having something to say and experimenting. That’s it, it’s the UK perspective and it’s the UK voice and that’s something that’s always gonna need to be heard (qtd in Collins 317).

Both the survival of Grime as a genre and its more recent widespread popularity are due in no small part to the ubiquity of digital media technology, social media, and the ease with which content can be shared and accessed. As Kano reflects in his *Made In The Manor* documentary: “D Double E, Forest Gate, Dizzee, Wiley, Bow, me, East Ham, Demon, Plaistow, Ghetto, [...] everyone was from this area. Now, it’s just like kids from everywhere, they’re on the internet, they haven’t got to live next to one of these stations, they can just get their music out online or whatever.” Technology has facilitated increases in the visibility and the influence of a sector of society – young, working-class, BAME – who, excluded from the mainstream of media and political discourse, have created for themselves a space in which their authentic voices can be

heard and the significance of their lives and creativity acknowledged and supported. Such developments have enabled the growth of Grime scenes in a number of other English cities, most notably Birmingham, but also Manchester, Sheffield, and Nottingham, and also overseas, in China, Japan, Russia, Portugal, South Africa, the Netherlands and Denmark. DJ Citrus observes that “nowadays I’m getting music sent to me from all over. There are guys in Russia who are making tracks on par with and even better than a lot of UK producers, which is crazy but also amazing to think our sound has had an impact on a culture so different to ours” (DJ Citrus). Like Hip Hop and Punk before it, Grime is a musical form that emerged from a very specific set of local circumstances, but with the potential travel widely and to speak to, and for, marginalized fractions of society in diverse places, addressing and expressing the commonalities and specificities of the experiences of young people in each of these.

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¹ Interviewees were sourced via social media, Twitter in particular, and personal contacts and recommendations. Interviews were conducted by email and telephone.

² Council estate is the usual terminology in the UK for public/social housing projects and developments. Largely built in the decades after WWII to replace older housing categorised as slums, these estates have a (not always deserved) reputation as sites of criminality, violence and anti-social behaviour.

³ The term “Cockney” refers to the working-class people and culture of the East End of London. Cockney English is characterised by a distinctive accent and a dialect which uses “rhyming slang” as substitutes for certain words; for example, “apples and pears” for stairs.

⁴ Food is often invoked as a marker of a distinctive Englishness. In “All Hallows” (2013) CASisDEAD asserts that he is “as English as Fruit and Barley [drink], Or HP Sauce on your bacon sarnie [sandwich].”

⁵ Perhaps surprisingly, given its name, The Queen’s English Society concurs with Clark’s assessment. Paul Kerswill quotes their response to Starkey’s comments on *Newsnight*, as reported to a journalist from *The Independent* newspaper.

David Roberts of the Queen’s English Society said the move was part of the general development of language and should not be regarded as inferior to other codes so long as it was readily understandable to others. ‘The only purpose of language is to

convey thoughts from inside one person's head to another as accurately and comprehensively as possible. Language must be able to adapt. If it hadn't we would all be addressing each other as thou and thee. You cannot put constraints on the development of language.' (436)

⁶ In a short video made for BBC Three, Grime MC and internet personality Big Narstie asserts the importance of class, culture and locality over ethnicity in the use of MLE. Responding to the question "Can White People Say 'Wagwan?'" he says:

It's not a black thing. It's not a white thing. It's a London thing. And fuck that, it's not a London thing, it's a fucking England thing. [...] So why can't my white dog say 'wagwan'? It's irritating when you hear a country kid who's not from our lifestyle and culture, and this is why I say the difference between colour and culture, because when I say culture, all kids from the suburbs and ghetto lifestyle we are all one colour, we're all ghetto. We're the colour of ghetto. So, Jamie who's white from the same estate as me, yeah, and Darren who's black from the same estate as me, year, and Vu who's Vietnamese from the same estate from me, and Fong, who's from flippin' China and the same estate from me... What, Fong, Vu, and dem men can't say 'wagwan' cause they're not black? You fuckin' dick'ead. Shut up. [...] Idiot talk. Let's settle this, white people can say fucking 'wagwan', yeah. The only thing they can't be talking about is niggers [...] because that word's got a history innit.

⁷ Rinse FM DJ and Grime pioneer Slimzee was famously the first recipient of an ASBO (Anti-Social Behaviour Order, a form of civil injunction introduced in the UK in the late 1990s) for his involvement in pirate radio. He was prohibited from

entering any roof of any building over four storeys without permission for five years.

(DJ Slimzee. “Just looking”)

⁸ A fire that broke out in a block of high-rise flats in London in June 2017, killing 71 people, many of them working-class and/or BAME. It is regarded by many as a consequence of cost-cutting in social housing.

⁹ Perhaps ironically, in late October 2017 Stormzy celebrated appearing as the guest star on *X Factor*.

¹⁰ Although it reaches a peak of maturity on *Made In The Manor*, this is a consistent theme throughout Kano’s recorded output. Previous albums were entitled *Home Sweet Home* (2005), *London Town* (2007) and *140 Grime Street* (2008).

¹¹ The National Trust is a British conservation organisation; It is best known for its protection of country houses, open as visitor attractions, but also cares for historic landscapes, urban architecture and nature reserves.